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Dentistry in Cats and Dogs at Murray Bridge Vet Clinic

Dental Disease

Dental disease is a common problem in cats and dogs. The majority of cats and dogs will experience some form of dental disease during their lives, many before they reach 5 years of age. In some cases the dental disease may be mild and can be treated at home in the form of a special diet or brushing teeth. In many cases however the disease has progressed too far for these types of treatment and the pet requires a general anaesthetic to address the problem.

Before the anaesthetic

Many patients undergoing dental procedures are older patients and patients with other health problems. It is therefore very important that they have a thorough health examination done before their anaesthetic. Initially this consists of a physical examination at the time of the initial consultation. In many patients a blood test is also performed before the procedure to check for evidence of other disease that may affect their ability to cope with an anaesthetic. If other health problems are found during the physical exam or blood testing these may need to be treated before the patient can undergo an anaesthetic. In other cases the patient may need additional precautions to be taken before/during/after the anaesthetic. For example patients with kidney disease may need to stay in hospital to receive fluids for a night before and after their dental procedure to help them cope with the anaesthetic.

Part of the initial physical examination involves checking the patient's teeth and giving them a score out of 4 with 4 being the worst. This score gives us an idea of how severe the dental disease is and what will need to be done. A complete examination of the teeth is done while the animal is under anaesthetic as this is very difficult to do in an awake pet. Final decisions regarding removal of teeth are made while the pet is under anaesthetic after the teeth have been properly examined.

The anaesthetic

All patients receiving a general anaesthetic at Murray Bridge Vet Clinic have a catheter placed into a vein (usually in their front leg) prior to the anaesthetic. This allows the anaesthetic agent to be safely given to the patient and any medication that may be required can be delivered quickly and easily. All patients receive fluids through this catheter during their anaesthetic and most also receive fluids for a few hours before and after the procedure. This helps their body to process the anaesthetic and helps to keep their blood pressure high enough during the anaesthetic. As soon as the patient has received the anaesthetic a tube is placed into their throat to deliver oxygen straight to their lungs as well as the anaesthetic gas required to keep them asleep. All patients are connected to special machines during their anaesthetic to allow us to better monitor them while they are asleep. Warming devices are used to stop them from getting too cold and a nurse is present throughout the entire procedure to monitor the patient. Before starting the dental procedure a "gag" is placed into the patient's throat to stop anything going from their mouth into their airway during the procedure.

Periodontal Probing and Charting of Teeth

Once the patient is asleep and stable under the anaesthetic their teeth are examined and probed with a special instrument to check for pockets around the teeth. Pockets occur around the tooth when the tooth starts to detach from the surrounding gum. These pockets can become filled with tartar and bacteria causing infection which generally results in the pocket getting worse and the tooth becoming loose. The results of this examination and probing are recorded on a special dental chart. The amount of tartar on the teeth and the degree of gingivitis (gum disease) is also recorded on the chart.

During this examination of the teeth under anaesthetic decisions are made as to which teeth should be removed and which just need to be cleaned. Reasons to remove teeth include deep pockets, exposed roots, broken teeth or loose teeth. Some cats get painful erosive lesions on their teeth similar to cavities humans get but these occur on the surface of the cat's tooth near the gum line. Teeth affected by these types of lesions must be removed to alleviate the cat's pain. Teeth removed as well as those missing are all recorded on the patient's dental chart.

Removal of Teeth

Before any teeth are extracted nerve blocks are given to numb the area the tooth is to be removed from. This reduces the anaesthetic the patient requires and makes them more comfortable on recovery. Teeth are extracted by first loosening their root's attachment to the jaw with an instrument called an elevator. Once they are loose they are lifted out of the mouth with extraction forceps and the remaining socket is flushed out. Some teeth with more than one root need to be drilled to pieces to make them easier to extract. Once the teeth are removed the gum may be stitched closed with dissolving stitches. Sometimes gum disease means the gum is unable to be stitched and sometimes stitches are not necessary. Occasionally with larger teeth a flap of bone and gum may be surgically lifted up to expose the roots and make the extraction easier. Once the tooth is out dissolvable stitches are placed to hold everything in place while it heals.

Scaling and Polishing

Prior to scaling teeth large pieces of tartar are carefully removed from the teeth by hand. All teeth are then scaled carefully using a hand scaler as well as an ultrasonic scaler similar to those used by human dentists. Care is taken to remove all the plaque and tartar on the teeth including anything that has collected underneath the gums. After the teeth have been scaled a special light is used to check that all the plaque has been removed. The teeth are then polished with a special paste using an electronic polishing tool. The mouth is then flushed out with water and air and the patient is woken up from their anaesthetic.

Post Operative Care at Home

This varies depending on the individual patient and you will be given instructions at the discharge appointment specific to your pet. Generally patients that have had teeth extracted need to be fed a diet of meat chunks for 1-2 weeks to make sure food does not get caught where the teeth were removed from. Tooth brushing and special dental diets to help prevent future dental disease can usually be started 1-2 weeks after the dental procedure. Some patients are either not co-operative for procedures such as tooth brushing or continue to get dental disease despite their owners best efforts. These patients tend to benefit from regular dental procedures (approximately every 12 months) to address any problems. Regular dental checks will ensure your pet's teeth are receiving the attention they require.